

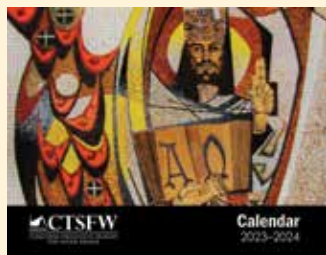
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Volume Twenty-Seven, Number Four

## CTSFW Wall Calendars

Now Available

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), mailed its 2024 wall calendar to CTSFW alumni and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at the end of November. A limited number of additional copies are available to individuals and congregations.



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## For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

## FEATURES

### 4 Luther's Order of Baptism, 1523

**Cameron A. MacKenzie**

Martin Luther rejoiced that God had preserved baptism through all the preceding centuries and by it had offered salvation to countless numbers of people. The problem was, however, that few of them knew it. Luther's little baptism book of 1523 was his first effort at putting the rite of baptism—the words and prayers by which a pastor baptizes somebody—into German, the language of his people. It was a giant step forward in teaching them about the importance of baptism.

### 7 The Formula Missae: Amputating the Dragon's Tail

**Jon S. Bruss**

As a meritorious sacrifice from human to God, the mass was, according to Martin Luther, the very dragon's tail [*Trachenschwanz*] that had swept Christendom clean of Christ's gifts and left nothing but a trail of poison. Reform of the mass required teaching—through the Word, not by force—and good, patient teaching takes time.

### 10 Let Me Sing You a Song

**Paul J. Grime**

More than five years before publishing the Small Catechism, Martin Luther recognized that music combined with words would work admirably to implant his Reformation insights into the hearts of God's people. And what better way to do so than by borrowing the methods of the Meistersingers and writing ballads that told the news of God's love in Christ Jesus?

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# Let Me Sing You a



# Song

Paul J. Grime

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More than five years before publishing the Small Catechism, Luther recognized in particular that music combined with words would work admirably to implant his Reformation insights into the hearts of God's people.

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Photo: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod/Erk W. Lunsford

**H**ow do you get your news today? Network television? Radio? Newspaper? Internet? Or perhaps these days you prefer to avoid the news altogether! Imagine a time when none of those media were available. News traveled slowly, and the number of news items that reached the average person was rather few.

At the dawn of the Reformation, a unique method for dissemination of the news came into fashion. Guilds of singers (known as Meistersingers, that is, master singers) composed simple songs, akin to a ballad, as a way of disseminating news. Standing on street corners, they would “sing” the news for a few pennies. Taking advantage of the printing press, the songs were also printed on single sheets of paper called broadsheets that tavern owners and others could post on the wall as a way of spreading newsworthy events.

Just imagine the business Martin Luther drummed up for those Meistersingers when he posted his Ninety-Five Theses! After all, folks loved gossip and political intrigue as much then as they do now. Many of their songs naturally supported Luther's action. Not surprisingly, in Roman Catholic territories, songs opposed to Luther were also heard.

While Luther was a well-trained theologian whose full-length treatises could go toe-to-toe with the best theologians of his day, he nevertheless had a pastoral heart that led him to translate those deep theological truths into simple expressions of the Christian faith. Think, for example, of his explanations in the Small Catechism. With just a few short phrases, he could get to the heart of each of the commandments or, in the case of the

Creed, unpack the inscrutable mystery of the triune God.

## **The Gospel in Song**

It was this desire for clear and direct teaching of the faith that led Luther on his journey of writing hymns. More than five years before publishing the Small Catechism, Luther recognized in particular that music combined with words would work admirably to implant his Reformation insights into the hearts of God's people. And what better way to do so than by borrowing the methods of those Meistersingers and writing ballads that told the news of God's love in Christ Jesus. Consider the first stanza from what is perhaps Luther's most significant hymn, “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (*Lutheran Service Book* 556):

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice,  
With exultation springing,  
And with united heart and voice  
And holy rapture singing,  
Proclaim the wonders God has done,  
How His right arm the vict'ry won.  
What price our ransom cost Him!

You can almost imagine someone standing on the street corner belting out this invitation to join in singing: “Proclaim the wonders God has done!” But note that this proclamation is more than just a lone Meistersinger reporting the news. The invitation goes out for

“one and all” to speak this joyful message. And that is exactly what the remaining nine stanzas of the hymn do as they recount the story of God’s saving deeds in Christ.

The story commences, however, with an abrupt detour. How can we tell the story of God’s love, after all, without first acknowledging our need for His mercy? As we sing stanzas 2 and 3 it almost feels as though Luther has grabbed us by the neck and dragged us into the confessional booth with him. The language is gripping: bound in Satan’s chains, death brooding over us, tormented by sin, our life a living hell. (See text bottom right.)

With sin thus confessed, Luther’s pastoral heart quickly leads us to the comfort of the Gospel. From eternity, we learn, God has prepared an eternal home for us. In perhaps the most significant phrases of the entire hymn, Luther gets right to the heart of the matter:

He turned to me a father’s heart;  
He did not choose the easy part  
But gave His dearest treasure.

The thought is similar to an expression Luther would pen a few years later when writing the Large Catechism as he spoke of God’s mercy in Christ Jesus at the end of his explanation of the Apostles’ Creed: “We could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the LORD Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart.”<sup>1</sup> The words are simple; the meaning profound. There isn’t sufficient space to examine the rest of the hymn. As you do so for yourself, however, note the vivid language Luther uses, especially as he describes Jesus. He is the Father’s “dearest treasure” (st. 4), the “bright jewel of [His] crown” (st. 5), “our brother” (st. 6). Luther could never tire of proclaiming the great things God had done, all through His Son.

## Singing of Death . . . and Life

While it’s not possible to point with certainty to the impetus that led Luther to write those first hymns in the fall of 1523 and winter of 1524, we can make a good guess. On July 1, 1523—exactly 500 years ago this past summer—two monks who had adopted the Reformation teaching of Luther were burned at the stake in Brussels. Imagine how hard that news must have been for Luther to hear. He, after all, was the one who had first espoused those teachings. He was the one who was excommunicated from the church and banned from the empire. He was the one who effectively had a bounty on his head.

It turns out there was a ready vehicle at Luther’s disposal to tell the story of those monks’ martyrdom, namely, a sub-genre of the news songs of the Meistersingers known as execution ballads. When a notorious criminal was put to death, that news was also broadcast far and wide in song. This was Luther’s chance: tell the story of those young lads’ deaths, but in the process proclaim the Gospel and give thanks to God for their faithful witness as death stared them in the face.

And so began the birth of the Lutheran chorale. In less than a year, the first Lutheran hymnals would roll off the press. Five hundred years later we continue to be the beneficiaries of that amazing legacy as we continue to lift up our voices to sing of Jesus Christ! 🇺🇸

1 Large Catechism II 65; Kolb-Wengert, 440.

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Photo: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod/Erk. M. Lunsford

Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay;  
Death brooded darkly o’er me.  
Sin was my torment night and day;  
In sin my mother bore me.  
But daily deeper still I fell;  
My life became a living hell,  
So firmly sin possessed me.

My own good works all came to naught,  
No grace or merit gaining;  
Free will against God’s judgment fought,  
Dead to all good remaining.  
My fears increased till sheer despair  
Left only death to be my share;  
The pangs of hell I suffered.

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